

THE SOUND BEGINS

In tracing the history of rock and roll, it is useful to distinguish *rock 'n' roll*—the particular kind of music to which the term was first applied—both from *rock* and *roll*—the music that has been classified as such since rock 'n' roll petered out around 1958—and from *rock*, which describes post-1964 derivations of rock 'n' roll.

It is surprisingly difficult to say when rock 'n' roll "started". The term had been in use in blues songs to describe lovenaking long before it came to signify a dance beat. By 1948 it was being used in a number of songs to suggest both lovenaking and dancing—in "Good Rockin' Tonight" (recorded by Roy Brown) and in "Rock All Night Long" (the Ravens, and many others). In 1951 Gunter Lee Carr recorded a straight dance song, "We're Gonna Rock", dropping the sexual implication, and a year later Alan Freed, the disc jockey who was to rise to fame on rock 'n' roll, named his radio show "Moondog's Rock and Roll Party". But as a kind of music, rock 'n' roll did not make its impact on the national popular music market until 1953, when "Crazy Man Crazy", a recording by Bill Haley and His Comets, became the first rock 'n' roll song to make the best-selling lists on *Billboard's* national chart.

By the early fifties, the interrelated institutions of major music publishers, record companies, and radio networks, which between them constituted the effective source of power in the popular music industry, were all threatened by rock 'n' roll's writer performers and the businessmen who helped them find their audience.

1

Publishers had dominated the popular music industry since the years before music was recorded. Sales of sheet music to amateur and professional musicians were then the major source of revenue in the industry. The introduction of records did not immediately change this: the early inventors of sound recording were more interested in the spoken word than in music, and more in classical or serious music than in popular music. Thus, well into this century, live performances

Charlie Gillett, The Sound of the City

(NY: Doubleday & Dienstfrey, 1970)

of songs were more important to the publishers than were the firms that recorded them.

In the early years of the century, the most important source of new live songs was vaudeville and music halls, and many publishers had their offices close to the 27th Street vaudeville theatres in Manhattan, an area that became known as "Tin Pan Alley". When stage musicals began replacing vaudeville in its role of introducing new songs, publishers began moving uptown. By the end of the 1930s "Tin Pan Alley" was the area in the forties and lower fifties close to Broadway.

The record companies took their cues from the publishers, and up to the end of the thirties the vast majority of recorded music were "show tunes", or sounded like show tunes. They ranged from the witty comments of Cole Porter on love and society, through the elegant ballads of Hoagy Carmichael and Lorenz Hart, to the nonsense novelties of numerous long-forgotten writers. Occasionally there were writers like George Gershwin, with aspirations to make popular music as complicated as classical music.

Towards the end of the thirties, Tin Pan Alley and its show tunes were challenged briefly and in an indirect way by the sudden trend to the orchestral "name" bands, whose "swing" music was a derivation of the Kansas City jazz style developed by various black bands in the late twenties and early thirties. So far as we can tell from record sales, the spirit of these bands brought a welcome change from the bland temper of the lighthearted show tunes. The record industry revived from a depression which had seen sales slump from \$106,000,000 in 1921 to a little over 5 per cent of that, \$6,000,000, in 1933. By 1939, with the big bands, the figures had recovered to \$44,000,000.

Records by the bands dominated the best-selling lists from 1937 to 1941. During this period band recordings accounted for twenty-nine of the forty-three records that sold over a million copies each.¹ The publishing houses were affected because the repertoires of the swing bands consisted mainly of original material written by band members, or compositions by the black band leaders (Count Basie, Jay McShann, and others) whose musical style was often imitated, or familiar songs given new arrangements, and so the houses had a hard time introducing new songs.

But they came into demand again from 1942 to 1945, as the vocalists with the bands began to gain more prominence. The shift from the bandleader to the singer was begun by the bandleaders themselves, who competed with one another by featuring their increasingly famous singers. The strategy soon backfired. While Glenn Miller's reputation always exceeded that of his singer, Tex Beneke, Frank Sinatra in particular began to attract more attention than the

bandleaders he sang with (who included Tommy Dorsey and Harry James). The singers, in any case, depended on the publishing houses for their songs.

Since 1912 songwriters and publishers had protected their interests through ASCAP—the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers—who licensed performance rights to broadcasting outlets. Primarily radio, in 1941 an association of radio stations set up a rival licensing organisation, BMI—Broadcast Music Incorporated—who represented many previously ignored writers and publishers (hillbilly, race, ethnic and foreign) whose business boomed during an ASCAP boycott on radio broadcasts in 1941.

The band vocalists, having re-established the need for new songs, were supplied with novelty songs and sing-along ballads. Perhaps the appeal of this material lay in its ability to relieve wartime tension, but even after the end of the war these songs continued to proliferate, in the company of growing numbers of the kind of sentimental and melodramatic ballads that were still in sway ten years later.

The singers of this kind of material were all influenced to some extent by the creator of the modern ballad style, Bing Crosby, whose light tenor, in its flexibility, gentle humour, and easy charm, was ideally suited to the needs of Tin Pan Alley material. Crosby had begun his career in vaudeville, where he developed the technique of singing quickly and wittily. Then, as a vocalist with Paul Whiteman, he had learned the techniques of singing with a megaphone (necessary before the days of electrical amplification if the singer was to make himself heard above the orchestra). The megaphone produced a curious, deadpan and emotionless manner of expression, which was to form the basis of the "crooning" style that developed after microphones and electrical amplification were introduced.

Two distinct kinds of crooning were developed, one the smooth, "soft", emotionally relaxed style of Perry Como, the other the more angular-toned, "hard", involved style of Frank Sinatra. The soft style was best suited to sing-along novelty songs and sentimental ballads, while the hard style was better for more melodramatic songs. But singers of either style were expected by their record companies to handle all kinds of songs.

Hardly any vocalists wrote their own material, and their "creativity" was measured in their ability to improvise phrasing and impart meaning on Tin Pan Alley songs. The leading virtuosos were Billie Holiday, dry and bitter; Ella Fitzgerald, sweet and warm; Louis Armstrong, and Fats Waller, both gruff-voiced and humorous. But most so-called jazz singers were crooners whose ambitions outran their imaginations.

The most original of the ex-band vocalists was the hard crooner

Frank Sinatra, who rejected the style of singing that encouraged the audience to sing along with him, and instead took risks with melodies, improvising his own timing of phrases by stretching some syllables and cutting others. The effect was a personal style that gave specific meaning even to songs that had been written as conventional "general" love songs.

Sinatra's style involved audiences in his singing—and in him—as no previous singer had done, and stimulated devotion comparable to that previously aroused only by film stars like Rudolph Valentino. The audiences willingly confused Sinatra's image with his private self, amplifying the character promoted by the singer's public relations staff and the press. Perhaps largely as a result of Sinatra's popularity, a singer's image became as important to his style and its effectiveness as the words of a song. Audiences expected singers to protect themselves (or what was publicly known of their selves), and each listener wanted to feel as if the singer were singing to her (or for him, if the listener was male).

With this intense level of audience involvement in the singer's stage personality, the physical appearance of the singer became important. The conventional dark and handsome stereotype of the American romantic hero favoured the dark-complexioned singers of Italian descent who suddenly dominated the hit parades. Tony Martin, Al Martino, the Ames Brothers, the Four Aces, Dean Martin, Tony Bennett, Vic Damone, Sinatra, Como, and Frankie Laine were a few of the most successful, all of them helped at a crucial stage in their careers by night-club owners of Italian descent who were glad to feature them.

In terms of audience involvement, Frankie Laine, whose style was drawn from the western ballad style, from Al Jolson, and from Vaughn Monroe, inspired a following even more vociferous than Sinatra's with a series of unprecedented melodramatic epics of love and fury, including "That's My Desire" and "Jezebel". And in 1951, involvement rose to a new peak when another singer, for once not of Italian descent, inspired furores at airports, hotels, and backstage theatre doors—Johnnie Ray. In contrast to his predecessors, Ray lacked smoothness, precision of phrasing, or vocal control; instead, he introduced passionate involvement into his performance, allowing sighs, sobs, and gasps to become part of the sound relayed by the amplifiers. News of his style horrified observers across the Atlantic. The columnist Laurie Henshaw wrote in the British *Melody Maker* (February 9, 1952):

Johnnie Ray, a 25-year-old Oregon-born vocalist, has jumped from the \$90 to \$2,000 bracket by hitting on the excruciating formula of virtually breaking into tears while singing a song.

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According to a U.S. report, "his stentorian sobbing sometimes so unhinges him that he has to rush offstage to compose himself". That this uninhibited and tasteless showmanship registers with American audiences is indicated that [sic], within eight weeks of issue, Johnnie's tearful version of "Little White Cloud That Cried" shot past the 1,000,000-sales mark.

If an artist has to descend to this level to capture the masses, then the outlook for popular music is bleak indeed.

However bleak the future, the present was barren enough. Even Johnnie Ray was hardly as remarkable as the enthusiasm of his supporters, or the distaste of his detractors, would suggest. Only in comparison with the generally emotionless music of the times, to which Ray, like Laine, were exceptions, could the silly and sentimental "Cloud" have attracted anybody's interest.

II

Six major recording companies dominated the popular music market. All had their own distributing systems, which enabled them to ensure that each of their records would get to retailers in every regional market. Each of them had their own A&R staff—the Artist and Repertoire men who decided what singers to use and what records to issue. Independent record companies, in contrast, relied on a loose network of independent regional distributors, and had to persuade each one in turn to distribute their products. The independents specialized mainly in ethnic folk music and in rhythm and blues, and before 1953 they were of little significance in the popular-music market; of one hundred and sixty-three records that each sold over a million copies from 1946 to 1952, all but five were recorded by one of the six major companies.²

Of the major companies, two, Columbia and Victor, had survived from the early days of recording at the end of the last century. A third, Decca, had been founded as the American branch of British Decca in 1932, and like its rivals was based in New York. In 1942 the first major West Coast firm, Capitol, was established in Hollywood, and in 1946 the film corporation MGM set up a record-producing department again in the film capital. In 1946 the Mercury Corporation was established in Chicago.

During the twenties, the big record companies had been challenged by a number of small independents, which had been particularly successful in the specialist markets of black music, especially the "race" market, as the Negro buyers of blues records were then classified. But the Great Crash at the end of the twenties undermined

the independent companies, which either went bankrupt or were bought up by one of the majors.

By the end of the thirties, the major companies had a solid hold on the complete market for records, but during the war they yielded the specialist "race" and "new jazz" markets when forced to make economy cuts by the government ruling that customers must trade in an old record every time they bought a new one (so that the material could be melted down and used again). By the end of the war, a new generation of "indies" had established a firm hold on the "race" market, but the major labels had consolidated their grip on the "hillbilly" market, now becoming known as "country and western."

The term "country and western" was coined to escape the derogatory associations of "hillbilly", but the new phrase soon became as limiting as the one it had replaced. "Country" music was never literally played only by and for people who lived in rural areas, but represented that strain of pop music which presented "real" attitudes and situations in a "sincere" manner and with "traditional" musical accompaniment. Country music shared roots in gospel music with black music, and during the forties probably absorbed more elements of black music than were accepted into the mainstream pop of the time. Decca's "sacred" country singer Red Foley recorded gospel songs written in the thirties by the black composer Thomas Dorsey; Ernest Tubb, also with Decca, updated the white blues style of Jimmie Rodgers by introducing electrically-amplified guitar into what became known as a "honky tonk" style. For Columbia, both Roy Acuff and Bill Monroe showed black influences in their respective "Smokey Mountain" and "Blue Grass" styles, while the Delmore Brothers (for King, one of the few indie labels in the country market) and several others played what they called "hillbilly boogie". When Hank Williams emerged on the new MGM label in the late forties, he shook all these black-influenced country styles together, using as strong a beat as his recording supervisor Fred Rose would sanction.

As head of Acuff-Rose Music and A&R man for MGM's country division, Fred Rose was one of a coterie of businessmen who centralized the country and western industry in Nashville, Tennessee, a process which led to the virtual elimination of most of the "western" associations of the term "country and western", in particular the western swing of bands like Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys. As if hoping to deny the strain of black music implicit in most country styles, there was a virtual embargo on drums in Nashville recording sessions and, more relevant in this period, broadcasts on WSM's "Grand Ole Opry", the premier radio showcase for country music. Radio was a more important outlet than records were for country

music, and although the majority of country radio shows were at off-peak hours on low-wattage stations in small towns, they provided the framework for performers to develop their style, repertoire, and reputation which enabled the most determined to get exposure on one of the big five shows beamed across several states—"The Barn Dance" from WLS in Chicago, the "Midwestern Hayride" on WLW in Cincinnati, the "Big D Jamboree" on KRLD in Dallas, the "Louisiana Hayride" on KWKH in Shreveport, and the "Opry" on WSM. (The names of these shows recur in the life stories of every country artist, among which *Country Gentlemen* by Chet Atkins is particularly well-told and evocative.)³

The influence of the "Opry" became increasingly apparent during the early fifties as firms based in Nashville outran rivals based elsewhere—talent booking agencies, publishers, recording studios, and the record companies themselves. Decca was the first company to set up a Nashville office, with Paul Cohen as head of A&R, and the other majors followed suit with Columbia appointing Don Law, Capitol setting up Ken Nelson, and RCA-Victor's Steve Sholes deputizing Chet Atkins to oversee the Nashville office.

Most of the companies regarded "country and western" as a specialist music without pop appeal, but during the late forties and early fifties some of the pop A&R men began to exploit the BMI affiliation of most country publishers by recording pop covers of country songs; Mitch Miller was particularly adept, first at Mercury where he produced the enormous hit version of "Tennessee Waltz" by Patti Page, and then at Columbia where virtually every major artist on his roster had at least one million-selling version of a country song. This practice of covers benefited the publishers, among whom the leaders were Nashville-based Acuff-Rose and two New York-based companies, Peer-Southern and Hill and Range; but most country artists were shut out of the pop charts, even the remarkable Hank Williams, whose songs proved universally adaptable. Among the few country artists who did occasionally cross over to the pop, most recorded for Capitol's West Coast A&R department, whose promotion team brought pop hits home as "novelty" records for Red Jingle and his Natural Seven, Tex Williams, Merle Travis, Tex Ritter, Hank Thompson and Tennessee Ernie Ford.

But still, for an audience that lived predominantly in cities and sought its entertainment in their centres, the music that came out of the radios and juke boxes was incongruous. And there was, as increasing numbers of people were coming to realize, a much more appropriate alternative—rhythm and blues—and here the main companies were far less successful in satisfying what at first seemed to be only another speciality audience.

III

According to a report on rhythm and blues in a special edition of *Billboard* (March, 1954), the "Negro market" did not exist in a national sense until the end of the Second World War. Until that time, so-called race records, produced primarily by independent companies, tended to be distributed within particular areas—the East Coast, the Midwest, the South, the Southwest, and the West Coast. In the sixties, these areas still constituted distinct markets in that there were particular singers whose sales depended mainly on the local audiences within them. But now it is relatively easy for a company to distribute records across the country if there is a demand, which is usually created by disc jockeys playing the records in different areas.*

During the ten years after the War, Los Angeles had the largest number of successful independent companies specializing in rhythm and blues. (On occasion, a few firms offered hillbilly or country and western catalogues.) The companies included Specialty, Aladdin, Modern, Swingtime, and Imperial. But across the country, similar types of record companies were established from humble beginnings in garages, store-rooms, and basements, with early distribution carried out by the owners from the trunks of their cars. King, in Cincinnati; Peacock, in Houston; Chess, in Chicago; Savoy, in Newark, New Jersey; and Atlantic, in New York, were all founded between 1940 and 1950, a decade in which as many Negroes (one and a quarter million) left the South as had done so in the previous thirty years. By 1952 there were over one hundred independent companies in business (apart from many others which had failed to last), many of them specializing in rhythm and blues.†

In almost every respect, the sounds of rhythm and blues contradicted those of popular music. The vocal styles were harsh, the songs explicit, the dominant instruments—saxophone, piano, guitar, drums—were played loudly and with an emphatic dance rhythm, the

* The main responsible for enabling greater mobility of distribution between regions was a Los Angeles distributor, Jack Guishall, who established a national network in 1945.

† In a *Billboard* survey of the proliferation of independent companies (5 September, 1953), Bob Rolontz wrote: "There is a street in New York that is rarely visited by dealers, publishers, A & R men, and other distinguished members of the music fraternity. It has no plush restaurants, no uniformed elevator operators and few Cadillacs. Pushcart peddlers still sell hot dogs and pop from their carts and on hot summer days no male wears a coat or tie. Yet it is, in a competitive sense, one of the most vital and stimulating avenues of the music business. The street is Tenth Avenue, and in the area bounded on the North by 56th Street and the South by 42nd Street are poured daily the hard work and boundless optimism of a score of indie labels, indie distributors, one-stops, and juke-box distributors. . . . Over the years, the Tenth Avenue independent companies have furnished the larger firms with personnel, ideas and records to cover."

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production of the records was crude. The prevailing emotion was excitement.

Only some Negro records were of this type, but they were played often enough on some radio programmes to encourage the listeners who found these programmes to stay tuned. The other records played were similar to the music already familiar in the white market. But as the white listeners began to understand the different conventions by which black audiences judged their music, they came to appreciate the differences between the sing-along way white singers handled ballads, and the personal way black groups handled them.

The early and fullest impression on the new white audience of these stations was made by the dance blues—whose singers included Amos Milburn, Roy Brown, Fats Domino, and Lloyd Price—which provided a rhythm and excitement not available in white popular music. At first the number of white people interested in this music was not enough to have much effect on the sales of popular music. This portion of the audience probably consisted at first of college and a few high school students who cultivated an "R & B cult" as most of their equivalents earlier (and even then) cultivated a jazz cult.

By a happy coincidence, we happen to have some observations of remarkable insight made by the sociologist David Riesman on the popular music audience in this period, which illuminate the character of the specialist audience. In an article, "Listening to Popular Music", Riesman noted that two groups could be identified: the majority audience, which accepted the range of choices offered by the music industry and made its selections from this range without considering anything outside it; and the minority audience, which he described with details that are relevant here.

The minority group is small. It comprises the more active listeners, who are less interested in melody or tune than in arrangement or technical virtuosity. It has developed elaborate, even over-elaborate, standards of music listening; hence its music listening is combined with much animated discussion of technical points and perhaps occasional reference to trade journals such as *Metronome* and *Downbeat*. The group tends to dislike name bands, most vocalists (except Negro blues singers), and radio commercials.

The rebelliousness of this minority group might be indicated in some of the following attitudes towards popular music: an insistence on rigorous standards of judgment and taste in a relativist culture; a preference for the uncommercialized, unadvertised small bands rather than name bands; the development of a private language and then a flight from it when the private language (the

same is true of other aspects of private style) is taken over by the majority group, a profound resentment of the commercialization of radio and musicians. Dissident attitudes towards competition and cooperation in our culture might be represented in feelings about improvisation and small "combos", an appreciation for idiosyncrasy of performance goes together with a dislike of "star" performers and an insistence that the improvisation be a group-generated phenomenon.

There are still other ways in which the minority may use popular music to polarize itself from the majority group, and thereby from American popular culture generally: a sympathetic attitude or even preference for Negro musicians; an egalitarian attitude towards the roles, in love and work, of the two sexes; a more international outlook, with or without awareness, for example, of French interest in American jazz, an identification with disadvantaged groups, not only Negroes, from which jazz springs, with or without a romantic cult of proletarianism; a dislike of romantic pseudo-sexuality in music, even without any articulate awareness of being exploited, similarly a reaction against the stylized body image and limitations of physical self-expression which "sweet" music and its lyrics are felt as conveying; a feeling that music is too important to serve as a backdrop for dancing, small talk, studying, and the like; a diffuse resentment of the image of the teenager provided by the mass media.

To carry matters beyond this descriptive suggestion of majority and minority patterns, requires an analysis of the social structure in which the teenager finds himself. When he listens to music, even if no one else is around, he listens in a context of imaginary "others"—his listening is indeed often an effort to establish connection with them. In general what he perceives in the mass media is framed by his perception of the peer-groups to which he belongs. These groups not only rate the tunes but select for their members in more subtle ways what is to be "heard" in each tune. It is the pressure of conformity with the group that invites and compels the individual to have recourse to the media both in order to learn from them what the group expects and to identify with the group by sharing a common focus for attention and talk.⁴

Riesman's observation that no matter what the majority chooses, there will be a minority choosing something different explains how popular music continues to change, no matter how good—or bad—the dominant types of music are at any particular period. And because the minority audience defines itself as being radical within the music audience, its taste is likely to favour, consciously or unconsciously,

music with some element of social comment or criticism in it.

During the early fifties, young people like those described by Riesman turned in increasing numbers to rhythm and blues music, and to the radio stations that broadcast it. If the first listeners were those with relatively sophisticated standards for judging music, those that came later included many whose taste was more instinctive, who liked the dance beat or the thrilling effect of a hard-blown saxophone, people who may have found the rough voices of the singers a bit quaint and appealing as novelties.

It was this second group of listeners who provided the inspiration and audience for Alan Freed, who, with Bill Haley, played a crucial role in popularizing rhythm and blues under the name "rock 'n' roll".

Alan Freed was a disc jockey on an evening quality music programme in Cleveland, Ohio, when he was invited, sometime in 1952, to visit a downtown record store by the owner, Leo Mintz. Mintz was intrigued by the musical taste of some of the white adolescents who bought records at his store, and Freed was amazed by it. He watched the excited reaction of the youths who danced energetically as they listened to music that Freed had previously considered alien to their culture—rhythm and blues. He recalled (in the British *New Musical Express*, September 23, 1956):

I heard the tenor saxophones of Red Prysock and Big Al Sears. I heard the blues-singing, piano-playing Ivory Joe Hunter. I wondered, I wondered for about a week. Then I went to the station manager and talked him into permitting me to follow my classical programme with a rock 'n' roll party.

At Mintz's suggestion, Freed introduced a euphemism for rhythm and blues by calling his show "Moondog's Rock 'n' Roll Party", which started in June, 1951. By March, 1952 Freed was convinced he had enough listeners to justify promoting a concert featuring some of the artists whose records he had been playing. "Moondog's Coronation Ball" was to be staged at the Cleveland Arena, capacity 10,000, but according to firemen's estimates more than 21,000 people showed up, mostly black, causing such a panic that the show had to be called off (as reported in the *Cleveland Press*). Abandoning the idea of holding mammoth dances, Freed persevered with reserved-seat shows, and climaxed his career in Cleveland in August, 1953 with a bill that featured the Buddy Johnson Orchestra, Joe Turner, Fats Domino, the Moonglows, the Harptones, the Drifters, Ella Johnson, Dakota Staton, and Red Prysock.

Freed's success among white audiences with Negro music was widely reported in *Billboard*, and in 1954 he was signed by a New York station, WINS, which he quickly established as New York's

leading popular music station. He continued to champion the original Negro performers of songs which were "covered"—recorded by someone else—for the white market by the major companies, and in interviews he accused other disc jockeys of prejudice when they preferred to play the cover versions.

Once the new audience became apparent, juke-box distributors began putting rock 'n' roll records in juke boxes, which then provided a new channel of communication for white record buyers who did not yet tune in to the Negro radio stations. At the same time, in response to the new demand for uptempo dance tunes with a black beat from audiences at dance halls, a number of white groups were incorporating rhythm-and-blues-type material into the repertoires. It was with such a song, "Crazy Man Crazy", recorded for the independent Essex, that Bill Haley and His Comets made their first hit parade appearance in 1953 and pushed rock 'n' roll up another rung of popular attention.

By the end of 1953, at which point the Negro market comprised only 5.7 per cent of the total American record sales market, a number of people in the music industry were beginning to realize the potential of Negro music and styles for at least a segment of the white market. Decca took a chance and considerably outpaced its rival major companies by contracting Haley from Essex. At his first session with Decca, he recorded "Rock Around the Clock" and "Shake, Rattle and Roll", which between them were to transform throughout the world the conception of what popular music could be.

Haley's records were not straight copies of any particular black style or record. The singer's voice was unmistakably white, and the repetitive choral chants were a familiar part of many "swing" bands. In these respects the music was similar to a style known as "western swing" (and in particular a group called Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys). But the novel feature of Haley's style, its rhythm, was drawn from black music, although in Haley the rhythm dominated the arrangements much more than it did in Negro records. With Haley, every other beat was heavily accented by the singers and all the instrumentalists at the expense of the relatively flexible rhythms and complex harmonies of dance music records cut for the black audience.

"Shake, Rattle and Roll" was in the top ten for twelve weeks from September, 1954; "Rock Around the Clock" was in the list for nineteen weeks, including eight at the top, from May, 1955. By the summer of 1955, roughly two years after Haley's "Crazy Man Crazy", with most of the majors still moving uncertainly, the demand for records with an insistent dance beat was sufficient for three

independently manufactured records to reach the top ten in record sales—"Seventeen" by Boyd Bennett (King), "Ain't That a Shame" by Pat Boone (Dot), and "Maybellene" by Chuck Berry (Chess), the last recorded by a black singer.

IV

The growth of rock 'n' roll cannot be separated from the emergence, since the Second World War, of a new phenomenon: the adolescent or youth culture. Since the War, adolescents have made a greater show of enjoying themselves than they ever did before. Their impact has been particularly sharp because there were so few facilities that easily accommodated their new attitudes, interests, and increased wealth. Neither individual communities nor the mass communication industries anticipated the growth of adolescent culture, or responded quickly to it.

The initial reaction of society was generally disapproving, which served to reinforce whatever rebellious feelings existed among the adolescents, thereby contributing to an identity and a style which were fostered until, by the early fifties, adolescents really seemed to consider themselves a "new breed" of some kind. Among the creators of popular culture, this self-impression was fostered in particular by Hollywood, whose producers began to adjust their films to the realization that an increasing proportion of their audience were in their teens.

Apart from various films dealing with the general social life of adolescents (in family, school, and leisure situations), there were two pictures in the first half of the fifties that focused specifically on the generation conflicts of the time, *The Wild One* (1954) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). With Marlon Brando and James Dean, respectively, these pictures provided figures with whom the new teenagers could identify, figures whose style of dress, speech, movement, facial expressions, and attitudes helped give shape and justification to unrealized feelings in the audience. The plot in both films was clumsy, artificial, and morally compromised, but the undercurrents of frustration and violence in each were sufficient to give the films credibility. The sullen defiance of Brando and the exploited integrity of Dean were simultaneously reflections of and models for large segments of the audience.

Cinema was at this time the epitome of "mass culture", drawing situations from the lives of its audience, ordering these situations to fit a dramatic plot, and then returning the packaged product to its source as entertainment. There was little real interchange between the producers and the customers; the customers, having no alternative

source of films, could only choose from what was made available to them, and the producers measured their audience's taste almost entirely in terms of the way they spent money. The producers thus tended to put their own money into formulas that had already proved successful. New ideas were notoriously difficult to introduce into this arrangement.

Despite these rigidities, the film industry realized and responded to the needs of its audience faster than did the music industry. The film industry, for example, was prepared to accept Negro styles of speech into scripts much faster than ASCAP would allow these styles to infiltrate radio broadcasts: "Dig", "flip", "cat", "give", "square", and the rest of be-bop talk all made their way on to the screen with apparently no strong opposition—although of course black people themselves weren't very often evident on the screen. So, while in the film the images and the script were telling a new story in new words, as in *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without a Cause*, the music on the sound track remained the big band music that the new young audience had already rejected. Their rejection became explicit in a third film, *Blackboard Jungle* (released in 1955, the same year as *Rebel Without a Cause*), which was a major factor in accelerating the popularity of rock 'n' roll.

Blackboard Jungle, adapted from the novel by Evan Hunter, was about a teacher's experience in a vocational high school in the Bronx. His students, of various national and racial origins, were near-delinquents whose threatened violence gave the plot most of its dramatic strength.

One of the main scenes in the novel, where the students came into open defiance and conflict with a teacher, described an attempt by a teacher to establish rapport with his class by playing records from his collection. He began with Bunny Berigan's "I Can't Get Started". The collective reaction of the class was: "So it's a guy singing. Does he stack up against Como? Where does he shine to Tony Bennett? Guys singing are a dime a dozen.... Ain't he got no stuff by The Hill-toppers?" The teacher tried again—Harry James, Will Bradley, Ray McKinley, Ella Mae Morse. The students grew more restless. "What the hell is this, a history lesson? Come on, let's have some music." Their impatience turned to violence, and they broke up the teacher's treasured collection, throwing the records across the classroom. The teacher broke down in tears.

The scene accurately expressed the dislocation between the cultures of two generations.

Hunter's book was published in 1954, and in the relatively short space of time between the date of publication and the release of the film late in 1955, the musical culture of the young had gone a step

beyond the terms of the novel. In the film version (directed by Richard Brooks), it was the relentless rhythm of Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock" that emphasized the rejection of the relatively sophisticated "swing" of the jazz records played by the teacher. By late 1955, Tony Bennett and Perry Como were as obsolete as Bunny Berigan and Will Bradley, so far as the self-consciously youthful adolescents were concerned. The film version of *Blackboard Jungle* was a large success and a much discussed movie. What the presence in it of the music of Bill Haley, rather than of Tony Bennett and Perry Como, helped to establish in the minds of both adolescents and adults was the connection between rock 'n' roll and teenage rebellion.⁵

V

Both large segments of the general public and the music industry establishment looked upon the growing popularity of rock 'n' roll with uneasiness. There were three main grounds for mistrust and complaint: the rock 'n' roll songs had too much sexuality (or, if not that, vulgarity), that the attitudes in them seemed to defy authority, and that the singers either were Negroes or sounded like Negroes. This last change was a matter of most open concern in the South.

Some of the general attitudes towards rock 'n' roll were perhaps represented in the comments of the syndicated television critic John Crosby, who on most matters represented a civilized and sophisticated point of view. To Crosby, Elvis Presley, who was soon to begin his amazing rise to popularity, was an "unspeakably untalented and vulgar young entertainer". Crosby asked: "Where do you go from Elvis Presley, short of obscenity—which is against the law?"

The most extreme and bizarre expressions of antagonism towards rock 'n' roll tended to take place in the South. In April 1956, the *New York Times* reported several attempts by white southern church groups to have rock 'n' roll suppressed. The whole movement towards rock 'n' roll, the church groups revealed, was part of a plot by the NAACP to corrupt white southern youth.

A well-publicized outbreak of southern antagonism occurred in Birmingham, Alabama, where it was directed, ironically, at the non-rock 'n' roll singer, Nat "King" Cole. The incident was reported by Nat Hentoff as follows in the British music paper *New Musical Express* (April 13, 1956):

One of the world's most talented and respected singing stars, Nat "King" Cole, was the victim of a vicious attack by a gang of six men at Birmingham (Alabama), during his performance at a concert on Tuesday.

His assailants rushed down the aisles during his second number and clambered over the footlights. They knocked Nat down with such force that he hit his head and back on the piano stool, and they then dragged him into the auditorium.

Police rushed from the wings and were just in time to prevent the singer from being badly beaten up. They arrested six men, one of whom is a director of the White Citizens' Council—a group which has been endeavouring to boycott "bop and Negro music" and are supporters of segregation of white and coloured people. The audience—numbering over 3,000—was all white.

In the music industry, the feelings of antagonism were mixed with and reinforced by economic considerations.

ASCAP, the association of the "establishment" publishers, maintained such a restrictive attitude on the use of their material that many smaller publishers, who handled most of the songs recorded by the independent companies, joined a rival organization, Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI). ASCAP did everything it could to prevent the major radio networks from playing BMI material—which necessarily meant most rock 'n' roll songs. The association's greatest triumph was getting Johnnie Ray's "Such a Night" banned from the airwaves on the grounds of sexual suggestiveness.

Although Ray's version was for a major company, Columbia, the song was originally recorded for the independent Atlantic, by Clyde McPhatter and the Drifters early in 1954, and was registered with BMI. A typical "rhythm and blues" love song of the period, "Such a Night" recalled a recent evening's experience of the singer:

*It was a night, ooh,
Ooh, what a night it was, ...
The moon was bright,
Ooh how bright it was, ...
Just the thought of her kiss
Sets me afire,
I reminisce,
And I'm filled with desire.

I gave my heart to her
In sweet surrender,
How well I remember,
I'll always remember, ...
Came the dawn
And my heart and my love and the night were gone.
But I know I'll never forget
Her kiss in the moonlight,*

*Ooh, such a kiss,
Such a night.*

McPhatter was so intense about the memory of the experience that the audience often found the performance funny. The singer slightly overdid the ecstasy, feigning innocence of the humour in the situation yet somehow also communicating the sense that he was aware of his own ridiculousness.

Because of the intensity of McPhatter's style, and the success of the record in the Negro market, the producer in charge of Johnnie Ray's repertoire at Columbia thought that the song would be suitable for Ray, who had not managed in three years to repeat the huge success in 1951 of "Cry". In contrast to McPhatter, Ray showed no awareness of the essential humour of "Such a Night", and recorded the song straight in his usual dramatic style. In April, 1954, soon after its release, the record appeared in *Billboard's* list of the twenty records most played by disc jockeys. But during the next week, largely through the efforts of ASCAP, the radio networks agreed that the song was offensive to good taste, and the record was banned from the airwaves, which effectively ended its sales potential in the United States. Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom the record held second place in the best-seller list throughout the summer (kept from the top by Doris Day's "Secret Love").

Billy Rose, a senior member of ASCAP, was quoted in *Variety*: "Not only are most of the BMI songs junk, but in many cases they are obscene junk, pretty much on a level with dirty comic magazines."⁶ In general and as usual, the case against accusations of obscenity is hard to argue for, since a listener's interpretation, different from one person to another, is the final arbiter. Many of the songs that Rose would have classified as obscene were enjoyed as funny records by the Negro audience.

Nonetheless, to combat the accusations, the composers of rock 'n' roll songs were obliged to amend words originally written for the Negro audience. One of the most popular records in the Negro market in 1954 was "Work With Me, Annie", by Hank Ballard and the Midnighters (Federal). Written by Ballard, the song made crude double use of the expression "work", as the singer implored:

*Work With Me, Annie [four times]
Let's get it while the getting is good.

The next lines were unambiguous:

Annie, please don't cheat,
Give me all my meat.*

In this form the song was an easy target for critics of BMI's rhythm and blues songs, and a modified version, closely following the original's tune and arrangement, was recorded by Etta James as "Wallflower" (Modern). Written by the singer and Johnny Otis, the song provided the reply to "Henry" (Ballard) by challenging his ability to dance (and, by implication, his sexual prowess). The opening chant was changed to:

*Roll with me, Henry [five times]
You better roll it while the rollin' is on.*

In the last verse, the singer challenged Henry, while Henry—Richard Berry on the record—wailed his willingness to do as she asked:

*Well, I ain't leasin' talk to me baby
You better stop your freezin' all right, mama
If you want romancin' OK, sugar
You better learn some dancin' mm, mm*

Although the song was more respectable than "Work With Me, Annie", it still was not considered suitable for the general public—that is, the white audience. When Mercury recorded a version by Georgia Gibbs, the song was retitled "Dance With Me, Henry", and the opening lines were unequivocally about dancing:

*Dance with me, Henry [four times]
Let's dance while the music rolls on.*

Although the Gibbs version was spirited compared to most records made for the white market, it lost the sense of dialogue and communal feeling that the other versions had.

A similar destruction of feeling took place when Bill Haley transcribed "Shake, Rattle and Roll". The song was first recorded by Joe Turner for Atlantic, whose version was very popular in the Negro market in 1954. As written by Charles Calhoun, the song begins, in effect, in bed:

*Get out of that bed,
And wash your hands. [twice]
Get into the kitchen,
Make some noise with the pots and pans.
Well you wear low dresses,
The sun comes shinin' through. [twice]
I can't believe my eyes,
That all of this belongs to you.*

As transcribed by Haley the song begins more vaguely and more decorously:

*Get out in that kitchen,
And rattle those pots and pans. [twice]
Roll my breakfast
'Cause I'm a hungry man.
You wear those dresses,
Your hair done up so nice. [twice]
You look so warm,
But your heart is cold as ice.*

One verse of the Calhoun/Turner original is missing entirely from the Haley version:

*I said over the hill,
And way down underneath. [twice]
You make me roll my eyes,
And then you make me grit my teeth.*

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Haley, commenting on the charges of obscenity, insisted:

We steer completely clear of anything suggestive! We take a lot of care with lyrics because we don't want to offend anybody. The music is the main thing, and it's just as easy to write acceptable words.⁷

For a time, ASCAP was effective in encouraging radio stations to play their songs (invariably recorded by major companies) rather than BMI songs. But, particularly after Alan Freed moved from Cleveland to New York, in 1954, an increasing number of disc jockeys on stations oriented to white audiences began to feature independently recorded BMI songs. And as this opened up a previously inaccessible market to independent companies and their singers, some of the companies began to orient their records deliberately to the white audience.

Although Alan Freed did not, as he sometimes claimed, coin the expression "rock 'n' roll" or create a new music single-handed, he did play an incalculable role in developing the concept of an exciting music that could express the feelings of adolescence. When he first used the term "rock 'n' roll", he was applying it to music that already existed under another name, "rhythm and blues". But the change in

name induced a change in the music itself. "Rhythm and blues" had meant music by black people for black people. "Rock 'n' roll" meant at first only that this music was being directed at white listeners, but then, as the people producing the music became conscious of their new audience, they changed the character of the music, so that "rock 'n' roll" came to describe—and be—something different from "rhythm and blues".